

CHAPTER SEVEN

The War-Deciding Strategic Battle: The Historic Ho Chi Minh Campaign

After the first part of April, the political stage in Saigon was seething with urgent activity. The people demanded the overthrow of Thieu in order to have peace, in accordance with the request of the PRG of the RSVN. Weyand and Martin wanted to keep Thieu in order to avoid political upheaval, but to expand the government to include many elements, including the opposition, in order to negotiate with the NLF in hopes of avoiding the complete defeat of the "Republic of Vietnam," the so-called "Senate" of South Vietnam also issued a resolution which although it had no value, demanded a change of leadership in order to "save the nation!" Khiem toadied the United States and completely approved of its opinions, but Nguyen Cao Ky invited Cao Van Vien, Le Minh Dao, commander of the 18th Division at Xuan Loc, and a number of others, to stage a coup d'etat. As everyone knows, everything that occurred in Saigon, from military plans, the "Phoenix" plan to kill Vietnamese, and internal and external policies, to the infighting among the lackeys, was decided by the U.S. master. Thus Ky had to seek permission from the United States, but Polgar, the CIA station chief in Saigon, strictly forbade the coup. The straw hero, air force general Cao Ky, had to remain at his home in Tan Son Nhat airbase, awaiting the day he would flee. Of course, with U.S. support Thieu remained in power. He thought that Khiem belonged to Ky's faction so he dismissed Khiem as premier and minister of defense and brought in a lackey, Nguyen Ba Can to head a so-called reorganized government called the "Government of Combat and National Solidarity" and named Tran Van Don vice premier and minister of defense. It was truly a case of not knowing when to quit. Their end was near but those power-hungry men tried to hang onto their positions, while the opportunists continued to be obsequious toward their masters or get ahead by stepping on others. But they continued to mouth the words "nation" and "people."

By then, Martin realized that only by negotiation was there a chance of saving the situation and gain time to save tens of thousands of Americans and their trusty lackeys of long standing, so that they would not be trapped in Saigon.

During the time Ambassador Martin and CIA station chief Polgar contacted the other diplomats and politicians in an effort to search out all ways to arrange those anxiously awaited negotiations, our delegation to the Two-Party Joint Military Commission at Camp David suddenly became extremely important. Occasionally, prominent Saigon figures also arrived to request a meeting and inquire about the military situation, the attitude of the PRG, and the possibility and conditions for talks to avoid a direct attack on Saigon. That was easily understood. The members of our delegation were the only people in the frightened "capital" who were calm and self-confident, like people who were now the real bosses, who understood the true combat situation better than anyone else, and who clearly understood the positions of the revolutionary government. During that period we remained in constant contact with our delegation, and under the direction of the Political Bureau quickly replied to the messages and

guided every thought and act so that they could be appropriate to diplomatic atmosphere and to the developments on the battlefield.

Meanwhile, the White House was extremely anxious: "During the past several days, since Weyand had gone to Saigon, the White House had not dared comment directly on the crisis in Indochina. But on 3 April, when fierce fighting broke out around Saigon, President Ford could no longer remain silent. During his vacation at Palm Springs, Ford spoke with reporters and criticized Thieu from having withdrawn his troops from the Central Highlands too hastily and said that the evacuation of 6,000 Americans from Vietnam was under consideration. In dealing with one of the most delicate matters, he said that as he understood the War Powers Limitation Act he was authorized to use force to assist in the evacuation of Americans from any war zone in the world.*

"His remarks about that matter were not surprising. For in addition to the tense situation around Saigon his administration had to cope with a disaster that was occurring in Kampuchea. The military situation in Phnom Penh had reached the danger point in the past few days. The White House had finally decided to withdraw all U.S. troops there."**

Thus Dean, the U.S. ambassador in Phnom Penh, on 12 April boarded a helicopter, an American flag under his arm, and fled before Martin did. Lon Nol, the leader of the Kampuchean puppet regime, under the guise of going on an official trip abroad, had gone to the United States at the beginning of the month. On 17 April all of Kampuchea was liberated by the revolutionary forces of the heroic Khmer people. It was beautiful coordination between two battlefields that had long been linked together, in a strategic position of the three Indochinese countries relying on one another in order to exist and grow stronger, a solid strategic position that was as unshakeable as the Truong Son range and the great Mekong River.

While the Americans were carrying out the "Operation Eaglepull" evacuation by helicopter from Phnom Penh, in Saigon the pace of the evacuation also steadily increased. "After 7 April the number of U.S. transport aircraft arriving at and departing from Tan Son Nhat airbase greatly increased. Nearly a dozen C141 transport aircraft left every day, along with a smaller number of C-130 aircraft which landed at night to transport cargo."***

"From the very beginning, flights departed like a shuttle to Clark Air Force Base, mainly carrying DAO personnel and their families. Nonessential personnel would have to leave the country by commercial aircraft so that the

*Frank Snepp, op. cit.

**During the past few days the White House lawyers had prepared a report to Ford on the legal debate about the War Powers Act. In addition to other matters they pointed out that when the act was discussed in committee and on the floor even its sponsors agreed that armed force could be used to rescue American citizens abroad in an emergency. Since they had no other authorization, Ford decided to use that point to justify his use of Marines stationed aboard ships in the South China Sea.

***Frank Snepp, "Decent Interval."

evacuation could proceed rapidly. A State Department official contacted PANAM on 7 April and requested that company to increase its flights to Saigon. The officials of that company did not want to do so, for that would mean that they would have to pay out more to insure the Indochina flights. But they agreed to provide more seats by providing 747 aircraft for the evacuation from Saigon.*

In Washington, high-ranking officials were arguing about providing Thieu with emergency aid of \$722 million, which was regarded as a dose of medicine that would bring him back to life. Secretary of State Kissinger wanted to provide maximum aid, but Secretary of Defense Schlesinger protested, for he regarded South Vietnam as already lost.

Against such a background, we began to carry out the strategic encirclement of Saigon according to plan. On "D-Day," 9 April, battles to cut Route 4 west of Saigon and the attack on Xuan Loc, the key strongpoint on the life-or-death defense line of Saigon and Military Region III, began.

To the west, the plan had envisioned using forces of Group 232 to take the town of Moc Hoa, then advance along Route 12, and a combined arms unit advancing to cut Route 4 between Cai Lay and Tan Hiep and, in coordination with the 8th Division of Military Region 8, annihilate the puppet 7th and 9th divisions. But the situation had developed too slowly and the Regional Command was because our forces were not large they could be held up for a long time at Moc Hoa if the enemy concentrated forces and put up a stiff defense, so it recommended to the upper echelon that the plan be changed. While it was keeping the enemy tied down at the Kampuchean border the 5th Division unsuccessfully attacked the town of Thu Thua and the city of Tan An because the puppet 7th and 22d divisions had prepared fortified defenses and put up a resistance, while our division had only infantry and weak fire support. The Group 232 Command ordered the division to attack to annihilate the enemy reaction force and eliminate the enemy's system of outposts north of Route 4 in order to create a staging area from which to control that road and cut it whenever necessary. During the next few days of the fighting the division inflicted heavy casualties on the 1st Infantry Regiment of the puppet 7th Division and an armored regiment and liberated a broad strip along the Van Co Tay River and the Bo Bo Canal immediately north of Route 4, thus directly threatening that road. The forces of Military Region 8 from time to time cut Route 4 between Tan Hiep and Cai Be in My Tho Province, while the forces of Military Region 9 attacked the Cai Von-Ba Cang segment in Vinh Long.

To the east, during the night of 9 April and the early morning of 10 April, 4th Corps, made up of the 7th and 1st (formerly 341st) Divisions and the understrength 6th Division of Military Region 7, attacked the city of Xuan Loc in Long Khanh Province. The powerful attack broke through the city's defenses in many places and rapidly developed to the center of the city. At 0740 on 10 April we planted our flag on provincial headquarters and took a number of other bases and positions, such as the Police Service, the U.S. advisers' compound, the CIA intelligence compound, the ranger base, the railroad station, etc. The enemy still held the subsector and immediately concentrated two

*Op. cit.

regiments of the 18th Division, along with the remnants of the RF, ranger and armored battalions to put up a defense and launch one counterattack after another. On 10 April the enemy used helicopters to land an airborne brigade in the outskirts of the city to reinforce and shore up the morale of the 18th Division. By 15 April they had sent there two additional Marine brigades, a ranger group, a regiment of the 5th Division, an artillery battalion, and two armored regiments. Thus they concentrated 50 percent of the regular troops, about 60 percent of the artillery, and nearly all of the armor, of III Corps, and the equivalent of a division from the airborne and Marine strategic reserves during the first days of the fighting. They also provided intensive air support for their infantry and armor counterattacks, while also bombing the areas we had taken and our troop formations, as well as our supply lines and rear areas.

They used two types of very lethal bombs, the "Daisy Cutter" and the "CBU,"* used to clear landing zones for helicopters and for mass murder, which the U.S. troops used for many years in Vietnam and surreptitiously turned over the puppet troops after leaving Vietnam in accordance with the Paris Agreement. (After the liberation we captured a CBU bomb depot and are exhibiting that weapon in the Museum of U.S.-Puppet Crimes on Vo Van Tan Street in Ho Chi Minh City.) That was the first time since 1973 that puppet airplanes had dropped those bombs on targets. It may be said that the puppet troops used everything they had and all strength they could assemble to defend Xuan Loc. Was it that they feared the shocking statement made by their mentor Weyand when he drafted the final defense plan: "To lose Xuan Loc is to lose Saigon." The puppets not only went all-out to defend Xuan Loc, the key, central point of their final strategic defense line, but also hoped to win a major psychological and political battle during that perilous time. During that period the puppet and foreign press propagandized and ballyhooed the fighting ability of the revitalized puppet troops, and that the puppet troops were not in such dire straits and were still strong enough to defend the regime, etc. The U.S. UPI news agency on 12 April, thinking Xuan Loc could hold, said that the puppets had selected Xuan Loc as "a testing ground for the fighting ability of the South Vietnamese troops." That was partly true: the outcome of the battle for Xuan Loc would decide the fate of the puppet army and regime. Thieu very much needed such a victory so that he could appeal for maximum U.S. support and aid, in order to rebuild the puppet army, shore up the morale of their officers and enlisted men and, especially, so that Thieu could remain in power. The United

*The high-ranking CIA officer Frank Snepp in his book "Decent Interval" described those two types of bombs as follows: "The Daisy Cutter was a type of bomb used to blow down trees in helicopter landing zones. It exploded in the air above the objective and cleared an area of up to 100 meters square. The CBU was an even more terrible weapon. It exploded at a predetermined height, creating a billowing cloud with a radius of up to 100 meters and more than 2 meters thick. When it encounters flame the cloud gives off intense heat and creates pressure of tons per square centimeter that disintegrates everything. Anyone surviving that ring of fire will still be suffocated after the bomb explodes, thus creating a vacuum. In the U.S. arsenal, the CBU bomb is the most murderous weapon outside nuclear weapons."

States hoped that the puppets could hold out for a time so that they could have something with which to bargain should negotiations be held.

At the Regional Command headquarters we closely monitored each development of the battle. The reports of 9 and 10 April were very encouraging. The columns were developing their attacks well and we had occupied many objectives. But beginning with the evening of 10 April the situation became tense. The enemy counterattacked insanely even though they had suffered heavy losses. The enemy airplanes attacked fiercely, as if they wanted to destroy the positions they had lost. The Corps complained about shortages of ammunition of all kinds, and especially that the 1st, 6th and 7th Divisions were understrength because they had fought continuously since the fighting along Route 20 began. Then there was a report that the positions we had taken had to be given up one by one. Some positions changed hands several times. The losses of the 1st Division were heavier than those of the other units because it did not have much experience in intensive combat. The situation was very difficult.

Comrades Pham Hung, Van Tien Dung, and even Le Duc Tho were very worried when they saw that the enemy was concentrating increasingly larger forces and we appeared to be slowing down and had failed to take our objectives rapidly and effectively, or had been pushed back. The fighting was very fierce and we were afraid that we would suffer heavy losses at an inopportune time. Thus they suggested that our men be withdrawn from the city and annihilate the enemy troops all around the city, concentrating on annihilating them bit by bit. I recommended that I go there in person to grasp the situation first-hand and work with our men there to find a way to win victory. They agreed.

Thus on the afternoon of 11 April I headed straight for the 4th Corps headquarters. Our vehicle crossed the Dong Nai River by ferry at the Ta Lai ferry crossing and met Route 20 at Phuong Lam. The Corps headquarters was situated on the bank of the La Nga River, a name which entered history with the great La Nga victory during the 9-year anti-French resistance. That battle was commanded by comrades Huynh Van Nghe and Bui Cat Vu. Now comrade Vu was deputy commander of 4th Corps. When I met him on the bank of the La Nga River I happily admonished him to win a second La Nga victory. In fact, I was confident that we would.

After being briefed on developments in the battle and personally inspecting a number of areas, monitoring the enemy's air and artillery activities, reviewing the situation of the enemy troops, and assessing our actual strength, on 13 April we discussed alternatives. By that time the Corps had been reinforced by the 95B Regiment, which had just arrived, a tank company, and a number of field artillery and antiaircraft pieces, and had urgently brought in reinforcements and ammunition, so we still had good fighting strength. The enemy troops were counterattacking to retake the lost positions in hopes of regaining all of Xuan Loc City. The intensity of antiaircraft and air activities was great.

Comrade Hoang Nghia Khanh, the Corp's chief of staff, concisely analyzed the situation and then recommended that Long Khanh be abandoned and that all of our forces circle around to take Trang Bom and then Bien Hoa. Comrade Hoang

Cam, the Corps commander, suggested that we wipe out the puppet 52d Regiment at the Dau Giay intersection and at Nui Thi. Then we would take Xuan Loc. Bien Hoa would be attacked in coordination with attacks in other areas. Many others, such as Hoang Cam, agreed differing only on what forces should be used.

After listening to all opinions I analyzed a number of points and reached a clearcut conclusion: Xuan Loc was an extremely important point on the enemy's defense line, so they had concentrated many forces to defend it. At that time the enemy forces were superior to ours. We no longer had the element of surprise. Thus, it was not to our advantage to continue to attack Xuan Loc. We controlled Route 20 as far as Tuc Trung. Between Tuc Trung and the Dau Giay intersection (the intersection of Route 20 and Route 1) the enemy was not strong. We had to fully utilize our advantage on Route 20 and the enemy's weakness in the area around Dau Giay.

If we took and held the Dau Giay intersection--which we were capable of doing because the enemy there was weak and would be taken by surprise--Xuan Loc would no longer be a key strongpoint because it would lay outside the defense line. Bien Hoa would immediately be threatened. After we had taken Dau Giay the enemy in Xuan Loc would be confused and in a state of chaos because they would be cut off from their rear area, and become surrounded and isolated. The III Corps would be terrified, for large forces would be trapped outside the defense line. Thus we would make two moves. One, we would concentrate our attack on Dau Giay from two directions: Xuan Loc and Trang Bom. Second, we would withdraw from Xuan Loc and advance toward Ba Ria and Bien Hoa. Therefore, we could not take the pressure off the enemy in Xuan Loc but carefully keep them contained and annihilate them if they counterattacked or fled in panic.

On the basis of that analysis, it was decided to:

--First of all, use the 1st Division to annihilate the 52d Regiment at Dau Giay and Mt. Thi, a dominating high point there, liberate a large area, and defend at all the Dau Giay intersection, a position which would become a key position as well as for the enemy. We would stop and annihilate the enemy troops counterattacking from Trang Bom.

--The strong forces of the Corps would keep up the pressure on and annihilate the enemy in Xuan Loc, especially in the area between Xuan Loc and the Day Giay intersection, to support the Dau Giay blocking position.

--Send a force to lay an ambush on Route 2 to block that road, the only road to Ba Ria, and annihilating enemy troops fleeing along it.

--Rationally deploy antiaircraft firepower in order to effectively counter enemy airplanes. Meanwhile, the Hieu Liem artillery base and Group 113 would effectively interdict Bien Hoa air base, from which enemy airplanes equipped with powerful bombs had been taking off to attack us.

Everyone agreed with that operational plan and urgently prepared to carry it out, under the specific guidance of the corps.

I then discussed with the Corps and Military Region 7 the direction of attack after Xuan Loc was liberated, how the eastern column would attack Saigon once the order was received to do so. When we were discussing that matter we did not yet include in our calculations the forces commanded by comrade Tan, which were advancing south along the central coast. We were still working with the plan of attacking Saigon by using the existing B2 forces.

I made a careful analysis: The city of Bien Hoa, along with the air base and the headquarters of the puppet III Corps, had many complicated structures and fortifications. The enemy would take advantage of them to stop our advance on Saigon. After the loss of Xuan Loc was lost, Bien Hoa would be the most important point in that direction. By attacking Bien Hoa we would attack the "hardest point on the enemy's defensive shield, which would be to our disadvantage and slow us down. The enemy would be weaker--and unexpecting--along Route 15 flanking the Long Binh supply depot to the Saigon-Bien Hoa highway. We would then follow that broad highway and rapidly take the principal objective: Presidential Palace. Our advance in that direction would be mechanized, with tanks leading the way--and would develop very rapidly and have good support once we had established a 130mm artillery base at Nhon Trach. Meanwhile, part of our forces would keep the enemy tied down at Bien Hoa, which would be taken care of later.

Everyone agreed with that analysis. I also discussed with those comrades a plan: the 6th Division of Military Region 7, which was familiar with the area, would be reinforced by artillery and tanks and would move secretly and unexpectedly to liberate a segment of Route 15, penetrate through to Provincial Route 19 running through the Nhon Trach depression, quickly liberate Nhon Trach, and set up a 130mm artillery base there. From that artillery base, before the order was received to attack Saigon, we would shell and interdict Tan Son Nhat air base. When the various columns had advanced into the city it would no longer fire on objectives in the city but would give effective support to the eastern column.

In coordination with that column, we would use the 10th Sapper Regiment to block the Long Tau River to prevent any traffic to or from the city, and send a force across the Dong Nai River to liberate Precinct 9 in Saigon in coordination with the local forces.

The 1st Division was responsible for pinning down and wiping out the enemy at Bien Hoa, and for protecting the Corps' flank.

The principal force of the Corps--the 7th Division, with the 95B Regiment in reserve--would circle around Bien Hoa, advance along Route 15, then attack directly toward Saigon and take Independence Palace, the Corps' main objective.

The comrades in the Corps all approved of that plan and were enthusiastically confident of victory. Comrades Le Van Ngoc, commander of Military Region 7, and Dang Ngoc Si, deputy commander and commander of the 6th Division, enthusiastically accepted both the immediate mission of wiping out the 52d Regiment and forming a blocking position at the Dau Giay intersection and later taking Nhon Trach in order to set up an important 130mm artillery base to interdict Tan Son Nhat airbase and support the Corps' attack on Saigon.

We parted company with confidence in victory. My party urgently returned, at a time when everyone was urgently preparing for that enormously important battle. Meanwhile, the puppet troops who had been drawn into Xuan Loc and were trying to win a "world famous" Xuan Loc victory did not suspect that they were about to become "mice caught in a trap."

During the mid-April period all of us were anxiously following every move of the 3d and 1st Corps and the combat arms units, which were coming south to participate in the campaign to liberate Saigon. Groups of cadres were sent to guide the columns. Each unit followed a different route and had a different departure date. The 1st Corps would depart from the Red River. With regard to 3d Corps, some divisions would come from the Central Highlands and some would turn from the coastal road onto Route 11 to Dalat, then follow Route 20 south. The 2d Corps and the 3d Division of Military Region 5 would fight their way down the coast. Some units arrived before the ammunition did, and when some tanks arrived they were out of POL and had only one or two rounds. Some units needed to be supplemented and reorganized. The staff and rear services cadres were buried in work. Everyone worked much longer than normal, night and day. Enthusiasm and energy were multiplied and tasks were completed cleverly and quickly.

Except for the coastal column, each corps sent in advance a group of cadres to the campaign headquarters to receive missions. The groups had to study in advance the assembly areas, and assault positions their units had to occupy, the enemy units they had to wipe out and the main objectives for which the units were responsible. Then they organized coordination among the various areas and columns, among the combat arms, between the main-force units and the local units, etc. The staff cadres of the Regional Command, led by comrade Dong Van Cong, working together with Group A75 cadres commanded by comrade Le Ngoc Hieu, briefed them on all details of the operational plan and thoroughly answered their questions. Comrade Tran Van Dinh organized cooperation between the corps and areas and the sappers and commandos, and assigned to each corps, each deep-penetration division, and the sapper and commando cadres and units guiding the attacking units, objectives that had to be attacked. Everyone went all-out and contributed all he knew to the victory.

Because of the demands of the situation, and because the corps were arriving at the battlefield piecemeal, COSVN and the Campaign Command, with the participation of Sau Tho, decided to wait until all units of the corps had arrived so that we would have absolute superiority over the enemy, launch a rapid, strong, certain-victory attack on the final U.S.-puppet lair, and keep the city intact. The Political Bureau agreed with that decision.

We concerned ourselves with adjusting the campaign plan. On the basis of the plan drafted by B2 to attack Saigon with its own forces, which had been approved by COSVN and agreed to by Van Tien Dung and Le Duc Tho; on the basis of the forces that had been predeployed in the various areas and to avoid unnecessary, time-losing upsetting deployments; and with the spirit that the B2 forces, which were familiar with the battlefield, had to be responsible for areas in which the terrain was complicated and there were many difficulties, it was necessary to reserve the most forward positions for the forces arriving from afar which arrived in time to be deployed. The plan was adjusted, and the forces assigned missions, as follows:

The northern prong, which would originate its attack from Cu Chi and Ben Cat, attack the puppet 25th Division, and advance mainly along Route 1 to take the main objective--Tan Son Nhat airbase--would be the responsibility of 3d Corps. We had originally intended to assign that direction to the 9th Division and the 16th and 271B Regiments, but now those units were transferred to Group 232.

Group 232, as originally planned, would attack from the west, mainly along Route 12, with the objective of taking the Capital Special Zone headquarters. The 271B Regiment was transferred to the southern prong.

The organization of the attack from the south, which was still the responsibility of the 88th and 24th Regiments--now with the addition of the 271 Regiment--was the responsibility of Military Region 8, which designated comrade Ba Theng, i.e. Maj Gen Vo Van Thanh, commander of that column; comrade Tu Than, i.e. Maj Gen Huynh Van Men, deputy commander; and comrade Chin Pham, a member of the standing committee of the Military Region 8 Party Committee, political officer Comrade Tu Chieu, commander of the Long An Province unit, was named a deputy commander of the prong. The main line of advance from that direction was along Route 5, north from Can Giuoc. Its main objective was National Police Headquarters.

Comrade Le Duc Anh, deputy commander of the Regional Command, was designated a deputy commander of the Campaign Command, and comrade Le Van Tuong, deputy political officer of the Regional Command, was designated to exercise direct, unified command of both the western and southern prongs.

The northern column which would attack the 5th Division and advance along Route 13 to take the puppet GHQ, was the responsibility of 1st Corps. The Gia Dinh Regiment was responsible for the Saigon outskirts in that direction.

The eastern prong was previously the responsibility of the 4th Corps, which was now reinforced with part of 2d Corps and the 3d Division of Military Region 5. Comrade Le Trong Tan, deputy commander of the Campaign Command, was designated to command both corps and make the specific decisions in that direction.

Thus all five directions were reinforced with very strong forces, including both infantry and the combat arms. However, there was a shortage of military engineer units and facilities, especially river-crossing facilities. The eastern, western, and southern prongs were strengthened by the addition of strong commands because they were made up of many units and had many complications.

The forward headquarters of the Campaign Command was located in the Van Tam area southwest of Chon Thanh and north of Ben Cat, immediately to the rear of the 3d Corps. The Regional Staff had prepared that site in advance.

On 18 April comrade Sau Tho, representing the Political Bureau, along with the Campaign Command reviewed the campaign for the final time. Everyone expressed a high degree of determination to correctly implement the motto of the

Political Bureau and the Military Commission of the party Central Committee: "Marvelous speed-boldness-surprise-certain victory." With regard to main-force units, we had a three-fold advantage over the enemy numerically and were many times superior with regard to quality. We had to deploy forces to annihilate the enemy troops defending the outer perimeters and also strong forces to penetrate directly and rapidly to the main objectives in the city. We had to attack rapidly and strongly from the outside, in close coordination with attacks and uprisings inside the city, so that the enemy would not have time to react or carry out sabotage. The troops would coordinate with the uprising revolutionary mass forces to quickly take all installations and neighborhoods in the city in the briefest possible time. That was the content and significance of marvelous speed. It was decided that the five columns would have to coordinate closely in combat and that the five main objectives assigned to the five columns would have to be taken almost simultaneously, but that the Independence Palace would be the central, final objective. When a column had taken its main objective it would have to advance immediately on the Independence Palace. If none of our forces had already taken it, that column would have to take it and raise our flag of victory. If our forces had already taken it, the column would immediately return to its original position.

"D Day" for the attack on Saigon would depend primarily on the arrival of most of 3d Corps and 1st Corps. Previously, in message No 07, brother Ba had given the following instruction: "I have discussed the situation with brother Van and feel that several more days of preparation are necessary. When most of the forces of 3d Corps and 1st Corps arrive (both infantry and technical military equipment) the large-scale attack can begin. It should not be launched now."* On the basis of that directive we monitored, ever hour and every day, the movement of each unit of the various corps, especially 1st Corps, which was traveling the longest distance. Furthermore, we sent groups of staff and rear services cadres to be on hand at the assembly areas to help the corps inventory their forces, rectify their organization and supplement their ammunition and rear services. The Regional military engineers had to prepare the Ben Bau ford across the Be River northwest of Tan Uyen for 1st Corps, insure that the 3d Corps could cross the damaged Nha Bich bridge and the Saigon River, etc. It was truly a race against time. The situation in general was urging us on and the upper echelon was urging us on. On 22 April brother Ba sent a message which included the following passage:

"The military-political opportunity for launching an attack on Saigon has arrived. We must take advantage of each day in order to promptly launch attacks on the enemy from all directions and not dally. Delay would be disadvantageous both politically and militarily. Acting promptly at the present time is insuring to the greatest possible extent that we will win total victory.

"Immediately instruct the columns to act promptly and stress combining military attacks with mass uprisings and coordination among the various columns as well as between attacks and uprisings during the action process.

* Document of the B2 War Recapitulation Section of the Ministry of National Defense.

"If we grasp the great opportunity, we are certain to win complete victory."*

That message arrived at a time when all enemy troops at Xuan Loc had been annihilated, routed at Xuan Loc and Thieu had been forced to resign as president of the puppet regime.

During the night of 13 April and the early morning of 14 April, in accordance with a new decision made by 4th Corps the 6th Division had wiped out a battalion of the 52d Regiment of the 18th Division and an armored squadron, and had liberated the Dau Giay intersection. The next day we took Mt. Thi, Tuc Trung, and Kiem Tan, the last positions on Route 20 and wiped out the remainder of the 52d Regiment. The 6th Division shifted over to the strong defense of those areas and to wiping out the enemy troops who launched continuous counterattacks from Trang Bom. The 7th and 1st Divisions of 4th Corps wiped out bit by bit the enemy forces at Xuan Loc belonging to the 48th Regiment, the airborne regiment and the armored units.

After the enemy failed to retake the Dau Giay intersection and they lost all of Route 20, Bien Hoa became a front-line position but the enemy did not have sufficient forces to defend it. On 18 April the puppet III Corps had to use helicopters to extricate a number of forces from Xuan Loc and take them to Bien Hoa-Trang Bom to bolster a new defense line, and on 20 April the troops remaining in Xuan Loc fled the city along Route 2 past Ba Ria and back to Bien Hoa. We were able to wipe out only part of the fleeing troops because our unit which the Ba Ria Military Command had assigned responsibility for blocking Route 2 was careless and failed to prevent the enemy from fleeing.

Frank Snepp, in the book noted above, related that "On the morning of the 21st the remaining defenses of the Government at Xuan Loc collapsed. The four surviving battalions of the 18th ARVN Division, with its commander, General Dao, were removed from the devastated city by helicopter."

At noon on the 21st Thieu called ex-Premier Khiem and Vice President Huong to his office and sadly told them that he was resigning. Thieu said, "Because of the military situation, which he described as 'hopeless' (Khien and Huong agreed) there would be no point in his remaining in office, and his doing so would only impede a settlement."**

That afternoon Thieu announced his resignation and turned over his office to Vice President Huong. "During his solemn inauguration ceremony, Tran Van Huong, who was 71 years old, had arthritis and was nearly blind, promised to hold out until 'the troops are killed or the country is lost.'"

The experts at the U.S. Embassy laughed at those hard-line declarations. They regarded them as "a pacifier for Ky and his clique, so that they would not jump in."***

*Document of the B2 War Recapitulation Section of the Ministry of National Defense.

**"Decent Interval," by Frank Snepp

***Ibid.

"A few months later he (Thieu) told a friend on Taiwan that "Yes, my timing was right. I waited until the disease progressed to the point that he was bedfast. No one can surpass me in what I did for my country."

That was truly the style and thought of a president of the puppet regime.

While waiting for the forces of 3d Corps and 1st Corps to arrive we were concerned with the synchronized guidance of the Military Region 8 column attacking Saigon from the south. As stated above, that direction was the most difficult one because the terrain was very difficult, our staging area was very far away and our approach route passed through areas long held by the enemy. Some segments had to be traversed secretly at night, and in other places it was necessary to wipe out enemy outposts and wipe out counter-attacking enemy troops in order to reach the outskirts of Saigon. We had to travel a long way, through a highly populated area in which the supporters of the revolution did not always outnumber the families of puppet troops. The masses had not been awakened. It was an operation in which we would have to fight our way through. We had to be good at mass proselyting and at proselyting among enemy troops. Carelessness could cause the defeat of our operation before it had a chance to participate in the attack on Saigon. If our timing was not precise and if our deployment was not solid, we could upset the plan and not meet the D Day attack date. And if we were too early we would reveal the overall scheme and harm the campaign as a whole.

After careful deliberation, during the first week of April we ordered the Military Region to deploy the column. The Military Region had received its mission in February and had organized in advance and prepared its command, forces and plan, but maintained secrecy until an order was received from the upper echelon.

I have received permission to excerpt a few pages from the diary of comrade Tran Ham Ninh, the operational aide and secretary of comrade Ba Thang, i.e. Maj Gen Vo Van Thanh, commander of that column.

The brief, succinct lines of those diary pages, although not giving the whole picture, help us imagine the organization and implementation methods of a small offensive column of the Ho Chi Minh Campaign. I say "small" because to the south we were forced to use forces smaller than in the other directions: only three regiments and two light infantry battalions made up the prong's formation. There were no clamoring tanks or armored vehicles and there was no heavy artillery or antiaircraft artillery. In addition to those units there were other units and organizations, including those of the people, which did not participate directly in the column but contributed considerably to its success. In order to fight their way through, the forces in that direction had to wipe out 45 enemy outposts, liberate 12 villages, fight the enemy on the outer perimeter, penetrate directly to the center of the city, and take by the stipulated time one of the five key objectives in order to overwhelm the enemy with marvelous speed. The key objective they had to take was National Police Headquarters, the innermost defense force and the force which guarded against and quelled the uprisings of the people. It was a key objective of our strategic general offensive and uprising.

Comrade Tran Ham Ninh recorded:

On 6 April 1975

--2330 hours. Everyone is asleep. Why do I keep tossing around, unable to sleep?

--From the fields I could see the light of a flashlight coming toward me. I got up and turned on the lantern. A courier from the cryptography section arrived. It was 12 midnight.

--"What message could be so urgent."

--"A message from ZN."

--"I'm going back now, brother Sau (i.e. Ninh)."

I opened the envelop, took out the message, and glanced at the sheet of paper. There were many instructions. The message was signed by Bay Hong* and Tu Nguyen.**

I put the lantern in a corner so that less light would be visible from outside. I read the instructions. There had been a major change. A flashlight lighting my way, I went to see brother Hai Phat (head of the operations section), who was asleep. I gently shook him and he awakened. "I've received a message changing our mission." Those words were sufficient to set up and get out from the mosquito net. After reading and rereading the message, he picked up a flashlight and went immediately to the command headquarters. It was 0100 in the morning.

9 April 1975:

I again left the beloved 20-7 area (an area in Cai Be and Cai Lay in My Tho Province, between Route 4 and the Mekong River), as I had many times before. Why did I feel so nostalgic this time? I had left the area only a week before but had returned after a few days. After I left this time, when would I return? I didn't know. I left my bag of (vegetable) seeds with brother Ba Lac.

My boat passed by the My Long base, which an enemy battalion had abandoned 2 days previously. The half-red, half-blue flag flapping in the breeze was a beautiful sight. The current flowed lazily, as if not caring that in a corner of that base there was still a body of a mercenary.

When we reached Nhi Qui, the sun had not yet gone down. Guerrillas had surrounded the Bo Keo post, so enemy mortar shells were falling haphazardly. The enemy infantry had not yet withdrawn from Route 4, so we could not yet cross the road. At 2100 hours I established contact with the provincial

* Pham Hung

**Tran Van Tra

unit. We organized a road crossing. Thus by 2400 hours, far from the 20-7 area, we rested for the night.

10 April 1975:

Tan Hoi, a staunch area, the inviolable base of the My Tho provincial unit. Of the command staff only Tam Cong was present. The commanders of two battalions who had an appointment to meet with the Command were present, and after having waited a long time were only able to meet with the E2 chief of staff.

At 1500 hours I set out for Tam Hiep, where I met E3 (E88). They were ready.

At 1900 hours I again crossed Route 4. To the right was the Trung Luong intersection, to the left was the Ben Chua bridge. With the help of the people, our column crossed the road safely.

While passing through the Bao Dinh area I met someone I knew. But we didn't have time to talk because the column continued to move forward. My friend's mission was to remain behind and defend that area. We followed a footpath passing in front of many houses. Inside the houses there was complete silence. But it was certain that the women and children in them could not sleep, for the sound of footsteps, although very light, echoed in their hearts. It was a moving, memorable scene.

Due to a lack of close coordination, the column went down to Luong Hoa but went to the wrong place and met no one. It was too late at night, so we slept among the roots of popinac bushes.

11 April 1975:

We arose early in the morning and went up to Song Binh, where we met everywhere. It was reported to J10 (the Military Region 8 Command) and Group 232 that the command of the southern prong had arrived safely. During the late afternoon the command crossed the Ong Vau road and went down to Quon Long (Cho Gao). When we arrived there, it was very difficult to find a level place to spread a plastic sheet on which to sleep. But it wasn't really much of a problem.

12 April 1975:

Quon Long. After a day we still hadn't learned about the whereabouts of E2, E4 (i.e. the 24th Regiment). We also could not learn about the location and activities of E3. We waited anxiously.

The determination of the southern column, to make its way to the assembly position by the stipulated time, was reported to R, Group 232 and J10.

13 April 1972:

The cadre team of E2, E4 arrived. But we still did not know the location of E3 and brother Tu Than.

Two My Tho battalions were operating strongly at the Cho Gao Canal. The enemy resisted fiercely. The enemy was drawn to that area so that we would not be bothered.

That night the division (5th Division). After the other units had launched their attacks, we would have an easier time of it.

E3 was encouraged to go all-out to attack Tan Tru during the night of 14 April.

14 April 1975:

Because of a lack of close cooperation, when the E4 cadre team arrived at Rach Tram no one was there to meet it, so it was unable to cross Route 21 and had to return to Quon Long.

E2 was ordered to return. There had been a change regarding the use of forces. What unit would replace E2 in the formation of the southern column?

The 279th Battalion wiped out the Ong Bai post, thus expanding our corridor.

All of E4 arrived.

Brother Hai Phat's team arrived. Thus only now could the column's command organ assemble. With regard to forces, by that time we had 2E and ed (i.e. the 3d Battalion). As for d10, d14, and another E, we didn't know when they would arrive.

15 April 1975:

Today we left Quon Long and at 1700 hours we arrived at the fields. We organized the formation and set the departure times.

We left Quon Long. It was unimaginably muddy. I didn't suspect that we would be in mud and water up to our waists. Following water coconut trees, we made our way to Rach Tram. When we crossed Route 21 it was nearly 2400 hours. There were no junks to cross the Van Co Tay River. We lay in the field and waited. Nearby was the Thuan My outpost. A little farther was Thanh Vinh Dong. On the other side of the river was Cho Dinh. How bold we were! It had been 15 years since I was there. I had very fond memories. My mother had passed on and was buried near there. My elder brother had fulfilled his mission during the anti-French resistance war. He had sacrificed a few years ago. Only my father and I survived. No! There was still a whole nation.

16 April 1975:

Nhut Ninh. We weren't able to cross the river until 0400 hours. When we took our first break the sun was up. Our clothes were covered with mud. The troops passing by looked strangely peaceful.

22 April 1975:

The command headquarters was still at Tan Phuoc. Thieu had resigned. The command sent message No 72ZN to E3 and E4 instructing them to both step up their attacks and do a good job of proselyting enemy troops. E3's attack was going well at Can Gioc (it had wiped out four outposts). E4 had also wiped out four outposts in Can Duoc.

Difficulties had been encountered in all aspects of rear services support for the past week. Too few supplies were being sent to the forward areas. During the day the column's command sent five ZN messages regarding rear services.

The command established contact with brother Tu Chieu (commander of the Long An provincial unit and deputy commander of the southern column) through E3.

23 April 1975:

Vam Rach Ca (Tan Phuoc). The command assigned E4 the following mission: "The line of development of E is Phuoc Hau and Long Thuong (Can Giuoc, bordering Binh Chanh) in order to fulfill the principal mission."

Rear services were very difficult. We knew that J10 was also experiencing difficulties but in order to insure victory we recommended that J10 (brother Ba Dao) send Nam Tri of Ba Thi to replace Ba Canh (who had not fulfilled his mission) and that J10 report the situation to J50 (the command of the southern column).

During the day E4 liberated Long Cang (Can Duoc) and was surrounding and attacking d2/E42.

Brother Thu Than went to Group 232.

The situation of the southern column was reported to R, Group 232 and J10.

24 April 1975:

The units temporarily halted their rapid advance and reformed their ranks to the spot. The positions of the E and d were reported to R, Group 232 and J10.

The reinforcements for J50 had not yet arrived. Recommended that brother Ba Dao (J10) look into that problem.

Recommended that brother Tu Chieu and E3 send a cadre from Can Giuoc to the command headquarters.

The command asked Tu Chieu whether he had been able to establish contact with the party committees and district units of Nha Be and Binh Chanh.

R ordered Ba Thang to go to Group 232 to receive a mission. A message was sent to Long An instructing him to go to a location on Route 4 in Binh Duc. We waded across the muddy and mosquito-infested Nhat Tao River at 1800 hours.

When we neared Route 4 the rice had been harvested and the fields were dry. We felt very comfortable. We lay waiting until 2200 hours but the situation was changing and we could not establish contact with Long An. We had to return to command headquarters.

25 April 1975:

Long Son. The fields were dry and the rice had been harvested. Received message 111ZN from Group 232 about the campaign's D Day. Repeat, D Day. The awaited day had arrived.

Directed E3 to do a good job of coordinating combat and the proselyting of enemy troops. The command agreed to leave d4/E4 behind, and have E3 take Long Thuong. A message was sent to Tu Chien and Bon Do (E3) instructing them to come to the command headquarters. The Long An D1 unit blew up the Rach Dao bridge.

26 April 1975:

Long Son: Starting today, messages would be numbered from 01. Message 01ZN was sent to Group 232 repeating the D Day date a second time (in reply to Group 232's message 442N).

Reported to R, Group 232, and J10 that we had encountered difficulty en route to the meeting. Recommended that Group 232 assign mission via message. Said that brother Tu Than could not go either.

Received message No 452N from brother Sau Nam (Group 232) assigning mission to the column, which expressed determination to fulfill its mission.

Still unable to make contact with Nha Be and Can Giuoc.

The command reminded brother Phong, commander of the 271B Regiment, to organize a march because the time was pressing.

Reminded brother Nam Nghi to go to Long An to defend the area 1 kilometer from the Cho Dao post to insure the command's movement.

1800 hours. The command headquarters departed Long Son in the direction of Can Giuoc. Passed through a populated area. Most of the people stayed put.

2200 hours, arrived at Phuoc Lam (Can Giuoc).

2300 hours, the southern column command met to evaluate E3's fulfillment of its mission and to review the good points and deficiencies. Brother Tu Do (regimental commander) and Nam Tu (political officer) of E3 participated in the meeting.

Note: Fulfilled missions, opened up approach route, and prepare to launch a rapid attack.

Stress teaching mass viewpoint to the units: fight for the people, protect the people, liberate the people, motivate the masses to participate in the revolution, and dig shelters for the people.

--Pay more attention to proselyting among enemy troops.

27 April 1975:

Phuoc Lam.

Recommended that Group 232 and R allow us to contact E117 (sappers).

0730, the southern column command met to discuss the attack plan and organization.

Received message No 53ZN from Group 232 stating that Group 232 had instructed brother Nam Man (of the Saigon municipal unit) have Binh Chanh and Ha Be contact the southern column.

--ld/E529 (Chin May) now in the Cau Nhi, Thien Duong area.

0920, the column command assigned mission to E4, accepted by Ba Thuyen, the regimental commander, and Hai Van, the regimental political officer:

--The Ho Chi Minh campaign will liberate Saigon.

--The principal objective: the National Police Headquarters.

--Time: night of 27 April, the advance element arrives in Binh Dang. Night of 28 April, the entire regiment arrives at Binh Dang. Night of 29 April, the attack begins.

--The command headquarters of the southern column: Nam Cau Mat. Field hospital will set up near the headquarters.

--Beginning on 27 April, no firing while en route, until the attack begins. The 1st Long An battalion will serve as the regimental reserve.

--The objectives of E3 are to attack Qui Duc, Hung Long, Phong Duoc and Binh Dang.

--Slogan:

Question: Ho Chi Minh

Answer: Long live!

--Code signs:

--Carry liberation flags.

--Wear red armband on left arm.

28 April 1975:

The command headquarters did not know the location of the 271B Regiment. The regiment had only recently come down to the delta, where the going is very rough. The command sent a message to the 271B Regiment and also a message to J10 recommending that it inform us about 271B.

Message was sent to J10 and Group 232, informing them that our supplies were very low and requesting additional supplies.

We sent someone to establish contact with brother Chin May.

Night. The command headquarters and the units left Phuoc Lam-Thuan Thanh with the units, crossed the Quan Com River and advanced to Hung Long. After traveling all night we arrived there and by the time we completed our fortification it was morning.

29 April 1975:

Hung Long: When they awoke in the morning and saw the liberation troops everywhere, the people were extremely enthusiastic. One old woman went out into the field and dug up a red flag with a gold star. I don't know when it had been buried, but it looked very new.

Message No 15ZN, to Tu Nguyen, Sau Nam and Tam Phuong, reported that the command headquarters of the southern column, E4, E3, and d10 had arrived at Hung Long during the night of 28 April. E4 would take Precinct 8 (Y Bridge) and E3 would take Route 5. The column command would also use the 2d Long An battalion.

The command sent a message to the 271B Regiment: "The time for fulfilling your mission has arrived. Move out rapidly."

Message No 16ZN to Tu Nguyen, Sau Nam and Tam Phuong reported that the 1st Battalion of the 3d Regiment would be used to attack the Hung Long subsector.

The command met to discuss the attack plan. Brother Tu Chien reported on the terrain east of Route 5 and on our situation and that of the enemy in the Binh Chanh and Nha Be areas.

In the Rach Cay area the terrain was very wild and belonged to neither us nor the enemy. It was very marshy and impassable.

The deployment of E4 was changed a little. Instead of the whole regiment crossing over to the area east of Route 5 and advancing from Rach Cay to Y Bridge, we would use only the 1st Battalion of that regiment to carry out that plan, while the 2d Battalion of the 24th Regiment would attack along Route 5 to the Nhi Thien Duong bridge, turn and go to the Pham The Hien ferry landing, and from there go to Y Bridge.

E3 would remain unchanged:

Message No 18ZN to brothers Tu Nguyen, and Tam Phuong reported on the liberation of Hung Long, the receipt of the 731 message and attack plan.

1900 hours. The command headquarters moving toward Da Phuoc. The regiments were moving according to plan.

2100 hours. Arrived at Da Phuoc. All elements dug fortifications. The masses at first would not let us dig, perhaps because they were afraid of "disturbing" the soil. We explained that the positions were being dug both so that the troops could fight and so that the people could take shelter from the bombs and shells. If there were no fortifications, the troops and the people would be endangered. Ultimately, they not only let us dig but gave us wood to make covers and glutinous rice for the troops to eat.

After 2400 we had completed the digging of fortifications. All of the fortifications were full of water. Some collapsed after being dug.

30 April 1975:

Da Phuoc. Early in the morning the sound of vehicles could be heard on Route 5. The command headquarters was situated 500 meters from the road.

Liberation Radio broadcast the communique of the PRG and the communique of the Saigon Front Command. I felt very excited when I heard it.

The command sent messages guiding E3 and E4 and relaying the two communiques, and a message reporting the results of the fulfillment of missions.

At 0800, message No 23ZN to brothers Tu Nguyen, Sau Nam and Tam Phuong reported that E3 and E4 had taken up positions at the designated time and had begun their attacks.

At 1000 E4 reported that it had crossed Y Bridge. There was another report: it was advancing to take the column's main objective: National Police Headquarters. The time was exactly 1030.

After 1000, the triangular Da Phuoc post surrendered. The command headquarters moved out to Route 5.

From Da Phuoc the masses used buses and commercial trucks to transport the entire command organ to the Y Bridge. The time was 1130 hours.

1200. The command headquarters of the southern headquarters arrived at the National Police Headquarters, an hour and a half after E4.

The final message, No 24ZN, to brothers Tu Nguyen, Sau Nam and Tam Phuong, reported the taking over of the Municipal Police Headquarters and the National Police Command.

One of the most difficult problems during the period of final preparations for the Ho Chi Minh campaign was that of military engineers taking the advancing

columns across rivers so that they could advance into the city. For example, we had to find a way to take Group 232 across the Vam Co Dong River so that the entire formation could arrive at the assault position. Group 232 had been reinforced with additional infantry forces, field artillery--including heavy 130mm artillery--and antiaircraft artillery--and a tank-armored regiment one-third of the tanks of which were T54's. In all, there were nearly 800 vehicles and artillery pieces, but the region only had half of a heavy ferry (the Soviet TPP model). An additional half had been requested from the central echelon but it had not yet arrived. In all other directions there was also a shortage of military engineer forces. The staff carried out a review and concluded that the High Command had reinforced the Saigon Front with the following military engineer forces:

--The 279th Construction Regiment had arrived.

--The 574th Road-Building Regiment of the 599 Command had arrived and would be put at the disposal of the Rear Services Department.

--The 249th Ferry Regiment had four companies and one-fourth of a TPP heavy ferry set. It was estimated that the unit would arrive on about 20 April but it had not yet arrived.

We had decided that the first ferry unit to arrive would be sent immediately to Group 232, for its forces had to cross a river before the others, and may be the only direction to require such facilities if the enemy could not blow up the bridges. The 1st Corps had to cross the Be River, but during that season that river's water level was low and the regional military engineers had already prepared a ford at the Bau ferry landing. For the immediate future, Group 232 would have to rely on the existing forces and mobilize on-the-spot facilities in order to cross the Van Co Dong River.

For that reason, a question that was posed at that time was what we would do if the enemy withdrew rapidly into the city and blew up the bridges on the roads leading to Saigon. Anything could happen, so we had to have contingency plans. We knew that Saigon was situated in an area with many rivers, streams and drainage ditches. The rivers and streams were deep and marshy. The rivers were marshy and the banks were marshy; after one went ashore it was sometimes necessary to cross marshy fields. The enemy had sufficient explosives and know-how to carry out sabotage. In their death throes they had all sorts of insidious plots.

That was a very great obstacle for bringing into play the offensive strength of the combined combat arms' heavy technical equipment. In all directions we had to cross at least four or five bridges. If the bridges were blown up, would our vehicles and artillery be stopped in the outskirts? We could overcome those problems, but the enemy would have time to build fortifications and obstacles and organize a defense, and our commandos attacking objectives inside the city would be isolated and the people could not arise. We would have to attack each defense line, street and house, so we would no longer have the element of surprise or rapid speed, and the city would no longer be intact.

At that time our troops did not have the capabilities of the other modern armies, and could not send in airborne units or land troops by helicopter to take the bridges by surprise before the main body of troops arrived. But that was not a simple matter, for it was necessary to attack and take dozens of bridges at the same time in many different directions.

We had a total of six sapper regiments, added to dozens of commando units which were on a state of readiness in the outskirts and in the city. Those were elite units which had been steeled and challenged over the course of many years of fighting the Americans and had achieved many brilliant feats of arms. Many units had been awarded the "hero" designation. The 3d Corps also had its own sapper regiment. Thus we were fully capable of preventing the enemy from blowing up the bridges and of insuring that the corps could advance directly to their objectives unimpeded.

But it was necessary to change the missions of the sapper-commando units. The Regional Command had previously assigned them the mission of taking the objectives for which they were responsible, from the five key objectives to the other important objectives, while the corps were entering the city, in order to coordinate attacks from within with attacks from the outside. Now their principal objective became taking and holding the important bridges in the various directions until the corps passed. Although there were many commando units and a number of sapper units which were still responsible for objectives inside the city, the strong units had to shift over to the new missions. The change of principal missions had to be carried out very urgently, within 4 or 5 days. The units had to study and draft combat plans while on the move. Another difficulty was that after taking the bridges it was necessary to defend them and repulse enemy counterattacks. That was a tactic the sappers had seldom used, and there was no time for retraining. Even so, confident in the capabilities and traditions of the sappers and commandos, and confident in their strong will and courage, on 25 April we decided to change the missions. The bridges had to be taken and held immediately before H-Hour on D Day, when simultaneous attacks would be launched on the city. If we were tardy the vanguard units and the success of the entire campaign would be jeopardized. But if we were too early our units would in many instances be in great danger, for the sapper units, which made use of the tactic of surprise attacks and not defensive tactics, and who were not equipped to launch direct attacks, would have a hard time holding bridges for a long period of time or retaking them a second or third time. Furthermore, the enemy could launch strong counterattacks before our corps had arrived and then blow up the bridge. The time when a bridge should be taken was determined by the rate of advance of the corps. The campaign command assigned to the commands in the various directions responsibility for assigning times to the sappers.

The direction with the most large bridges was the east. In addition to the bridges across the Dong Nai River, such as the Dong Nai highway bridge and Ghenh Bridge, and bridges across the Saigon River, such as the Newpost highway bridge and the Binh Loi bridge there were other smaller, but no less important bridges, such as the Rach Chiec bridge. In the other direction the bridges were not very large but there were many of them and if they were destroyed we would encounter considerable difficulties.

Group 232 had to cross the Van Co Dong River before launching its attack, but it encountered many difficulties. And because it had to maintain secrecy before attacking it had to cross the river at night and take up its assault positions at night in an area still controlled by the enemy: the My Hanh area near the intersection of Route 9 and Route 10 (Duc Hoa in Long An). The point where the Vam Co Dong River that had to be crossed was in the village of An Ninh, more than 10 kilometers northwest of Bao Trai (i.e. Khiem Hanh, capital of the puppets' Hau Nghia Province). If necessary, the Group was prepared to cross the river by force, advance directly to the town of Hiep Hoa, and then follow Route 10. Along that stretch of the Vam Co Dong River both banks were marshy and it was very difficult to find firm terrain. The area west of the river, which we had liberated during the first phase, was in the "Parrot's Beak" area, part of Dong Thap Muoi. It was a largely marshy area with some high-lying area and was sparsely populated. Trees were very scarce. During the wars, both the anti-French war and the anti-U.S. war, when our troops went there the people could provide us with much rice and food, especially fish, but we couldn't touch the firewood, which was precious. All of the troops brought along a small bundle of firewood for his own use. Along the bank of the river, an area controlled by the enemy, we occasionally had guerrilla bases. An Ninh village was a village with a revolutionary tradition. During Tet Mau Than our 9th Division bivouaced there before attacking Saigon during the second phase of the offensive and uprising. The terrain there was relatively good. There was a strip of high-lying land extending to Route 10, down to Bao Cong hamlet, and then on to My Hanh village, the first village base of the "Hoc Mon-Ba Diem-Duc Hoa Interdistrict Liberation Unit" in 1945--during the anti-French war--and a village of a heroic liberation soldier during the anti-U.S. war: Nguyen Thi My Hanh. Thus at the river crossing point we could cross from our area, which was marshy, and land on the enemy-controlled opposite bank, which was relatively high, and launch the attack immediately. The route from the rear area to the river-crossing point was very muddy and if steps were not taken to correct that problem it would be difficult to use vehicles. The cadres of Group 232, working with the cadres of the neighboring localities, mobilized the people to cut and bundle thousands of bushes and conceal them in many places. As stated above, wood was scarce there so only if the people were mobilized early and over a large area could we have sufficient wood by the deadline. The results were satisfactory and the enemy knew nothing.

Comrade By Triet (Vo Minh Triet), director of military engineers in the Regional Command, who was appointed as commander of military engineers in Group 232, related the following:

"The day before the river crossing the first rainstorm of the season poured water down over a large area. The road became increasingly flooded and muddy. At night the troops moved up to the river and sat on the bank. Everyone, from Brother Nam Nga to the staff, military engineer, artillery and tank cadres, were worried and anxious. There was the noisy sound of vehicles over a stretch of road several tens of kilometers long. When the first vehicle reached the crossing point the last vehicle was still at the starting point on the Vietnam-Kampuchea border. In the darkness, the people came up to the road from all the hamlets and placed on the muddy segments the bundles of bushes they

carried on their shoulders with every vehicle and every artillery piece, especially T-54 tanks and 130mm guns, that passed by the road was further churned up and the mud became increasingly deeper. More bundles of bushes were placed on the road and the vehicles and artillery continued to pass.

"If the task is easy, the people will do it,
If it is a hundred times harder, they will also get
the job done."

That saying is correct both tactically and strategically and is correct in war-time as well as in peacetime construction.

If conditions were bad on the road, on the river they were even worse. If there were sufficient modern ferries there would have been no problem. Comrade Sau Nhan (Bui Huu Tru), deputy commander of the regional military engineer office, who was responsible for the river-crossing ferries that day, told me that "All of the vehicles and artillery were taken across the river on makeshift ferries: in the middle there was a modern ferry platform, but on both sides there were floats we had made. During my several decades as a military engineer I had never worried about so many things as on the day the forces of Group 232 crossed the Vam Co River. That day brother Nam Nga came to make an inspection. The tank slowly crawled aboard the ferry. The more the ferry sank only the faster my heart beat. Fortunately, just as we had calculated, the ferry sank only to the expected level and remained afloat. If the tank had sunk along with the ferry, perhaps my heart would have stopped beating altogether.

"At the designated time the ferries were taken by truck to a point five kilometers from the river and lowered into a stream. Each ferry platform was poled and pulled to the river and then quickly assembled into makeshift ferries. We had to maintain secrecy and work urgently, and technical expertise was required on the part of each man. The commands of each cadre had to be very expert. Then there was the matter of propulsion. The river was broad and the wind was strong, so the "Seagull" motors of the military engineers were insufficient and the ferries tended to drift downstream. Only because the 230th Rear Services Group supplied us with some 50-hp motorboats were we able to cross safely."

That was a river crossing under noncombat conditions. If we had to cross many rivers or under combat condition, it would have been very difficult indeed. The corps and tank and artillery brigades that advanced rapidly across the bridges to make a brilliant entrance into the city could not but recall the contributions of the sapper units. And each feat of arms of a unit or combat arm would have been impossible without the contributions, of one kind or another, of the people.

In the plan for the attack on Saigon, our Regional Military Party Committee had one more problem about which it had to worry: its responsibility toward the cadres and men in our military delegation at Camp David, which was surrounded by enemy troops. The puppet troops had many times made crude threats against the lives of our men. Even after we had just arrived, during Tet of 1973, when I was still a member of the delegation, they used tanks to

surround and intimidate us, and threateningly flew armed helicopters over our roofs merely because the DRV flew its flags in order to celebrate a national Tet. Around Camp David the enemy set up 12 tall guard towers and continually pointed gun barrels at our men. There were many other ugly acts. Thus when we attacked would the puppets leave our men alone? It seemed unlikely. In order to seek revenge, and because there were few of our men and most of them were cadres, the enemy might well carry out a cowardly attack and murder all of them. We felt that we had a responsibility to protect our men there.

At the end of March I invited comrades Ba Tran and Bui Thanh Khiet to discuss that problem and concluded that before we launched our attack on Saigon we had to send a sapper unit that was skilled and familiar with the area around Tan Son Nhat airfield to take all of our men to the liberated zone. The plan was discussed in detail, a unit was selected and I assigned those two cadres responsibility for carrying out the plan.

The plan was urgently put into action and the members of our delegation were informed so that they could coordinate their actions. But while the plan was being carried out we continued to think about the problem and were worried. Most of the members of our delegation were cadres and there were very few enlisted men. They had insufficient combat weapons. And although our sapper unit was an elite one, it was small and was accustomed to attacking, not defending. There were many enemy troops around Tan Son Nhat and they were strongly equipped and had air and armor support. The fighting to break through the encirclement would be very one-sided, on a battlefield that was not to our advantage, and could easily result in regrettable losses. Thus we ultimately canceled the plan. Especially after the decision was made to wait until most of the units of the corps had arrived, after which we would attack rapidly and strongly from the outside, combined with uprisings inside the city, we were certain that the fighting would not be prolonged. If they made careful preparations, our men in Camp David would be capable of defending themselves successfully until Saigon had been completely liberated.

We immediately contacted the responsible cadres in Camp David and informed them of the opinion of the Regional Military Party Commission that the delegation had to have a plan to fight to defend themselves throughout the period of our attack on Saigon. The on-the-spot combat plan had to be based on a system of bunkers and trenches dug with utmost secrecy. They had to be solid bunkers and trenches that could withstand the explosive force of the enemy artillery and also of our 130mm artillery. That task had to be carried out very urgently, and the entire delegation had to be organized into a tightly commanded combat unit.

Comrade Muoi Suong (Col Ngo Van Suong), the political officer of the delegation, related the following:

"When we learned that a sapper unit would come to take us to the liberated area we were all very moved, for we realized that the party was always concerned about us, although there were few of us compared to the many large units. But although not saying anything, everyone had the same thought: when our columns were rapidly advancing into the city we would be a unit already inside. Why

shouldn't we participate in the fighting instead of leaving the city? Why could we not be regarded as an on-the-spot sapper-commando unit? We intended to send a message requesting permission to voluntarily remain behind and fight to the end. So when we were ordered to remain and fight everyone, both cadres and enlisted men, were very enthusiastic. Everyone stayed up all night digging bunkers. To avoid giving away our secret, we dug at night and rested during the day. We dug carefully and avoided making loud noises. The dirt that was dug up was hidden under the floors. Some was put into steel lockers, which became the roofs of the bunkers, thus further fortifying them. Within only a week the men dug a trench network hundreds of meters long, with bunkers and interconnected fighting trenches extending from the house of brother Tuan (the delegation head) to the units and even to the rear services element, and connecting with the remaining (graves registration) part of the DRV delegation. There was even a place for holding meetings and a place for the wounded. During the last days of the war some emissaries from the Saigon puppet regime who had come to take a respite and negotiate with us took refuge with us in those bunkers until Saigon was liberated. They were well protected."

During the Ho Chi Minh campaign our delegation at Camp David shed blood for the historic victory: an engineer captain and a master sergeant were killed, and five or six other comrades, including a lieutenant colonel, were wounded!

On 26 April 1975 a number of jeeps carried Van Tien Dung and I, along with the command organ, southward. The forward headquarters began to work.

Two days later Sau Tho and Pham Hung also arrived there so that we could quickly reach collective decisions regarding the major questions.

By that time the situation was clear. Saigon had been completely besieged.

To the west, on 26 April the 5th Division of Group 232 began its attack on the 22d Division, wiped out its regiments one by one, and completely mastered Route 4 between Tan An and Cau Voi. The 16th Regiment took the Binh Dien and An Lac bridges. The 115th and 117th sapper regiments took Phu Lam. Farther to the west, Route 4 was also cut in the Diem Hy-Nhi Qui-Nhi Binh area of Cai Lay District. That was accomplished by the My Tho provincial forces, including the Ap Bac Battalion--which was awarded the Liberation Army Hero designation and was led by comrade Le Quang Cong, which cut the road during the night of 26 April and the early morning of 27 April. Also on 26 April the 8th Division of Military Region 8 cut Route 4 between the Trung Luong intersection and Tan An. The forces of Military Region 9 also completely dominated the Cai Von-Ba Cang segment. The only strategic road running through the Mekong Delta had been chopped into pieces.

To the east, on 26 April 2d Corps attacked the Nuoc Trong armored training base and the Long Thanh subsector. On 27 April it took the city of Ba Ria. Route 15 was completely blocked. Also during the night of 26 April the 116th Sapper Regiment launched its attack on the Dong Nai highway bridge. On 26 April the 10th Sapper Regiment attacked enemy ships on the Long Tau River Phuoc Khanh and the mouth of the Dong Tranh River and blocked the river when it sank a ship the next day.

The Bien Hoa air base had been shelled by 130mm artillery at the Hieu Liem artillery base since 15 April. Many airplanes were destroyed and the air base was in a state of chaos. On 18 April the enemy had to send their F5 aircraft to Tan Son Nhat and their A-37 aircraft to the Lo Te airfield in airfield was closed, along with the U.S. Consulate in Bien Hoa City. The enemy had only two airfields left: Lo Te and Tan Son Nhat. Tan Son Nhat was sporadically hit by 122mm rockets fired by the 117th Sapper Regiment to the west and by the sappers of the northern column at Quoi Xuan. After the 2d Corps' Nhon Trach 130mm artillery base was completed and opened fire in the evening of 28 April, and the unique attack by the Vietnamese Air Force on the same day, in which five A-37 jets captured from the enemy and led by comrade Nguyen Thanh Trung, Tan Son Nhat was no longer of use to the puppets. The Lo Te airfield was shelled by artillery of Military Region 9 beginning on 28 April, but because that area was controlled by the enemy, we experienced difficulties and the enemy could use the airfield until 30 April, although their use was limited.

Both the Americans and the puppets realized that the situation was hopeless.

"Within the walls encompassing his life, Thieu himself had also begun to realize the inevitable. He could hardly avoid it. Before dawn on the 18th a communist sapper squad attacked the Phu Lam radar station in the western outskirts of Saigon. Thus the fighting was brought to the threshold of the city. About an hour later, General Toan, the III Corps commander, flew in from his headquarters at Bien Hoa to report to Thieu that, in fact, the war was lost, that the army was in disarray and was hopelessly outnumbered. There was no hope of holding out for more than 2 or 3 days."*

Martin, the most unrealistic and subjective of all, now also had to realize that defeat was inevitable and tried to persuade Thieu to step down so that a political plot could be implemented which would, with any luck, stop the advance of our troops. Martin, who jumped from one unrealistic proposal to another, was truly a person who lived in a world of illusion.

"Martin drove to the Presidential Palace to meet with Thieu on the morning of the 20th, after having met with Merillon (the French Ambassador) on the same subject and to the same end. He said to Thieu, 'I said that my conclusion was that nearly all of the generals, although they could continue to fight, believe that resistance would be hopeless, unless there is a negotiated ceasefire, and that negotiations could not begin unless the president resigned or steps were taken immediately to initiate negotiations.'**"

On 21 April Thieu resigned. It is not known whether or not that was a result of Martin's efforts.

Also on 28 April Tran Van Huong, who had been the puppet president for a week, was weak and feeble-minded but thought that he was "destined" to move heaven and

*Frank Snepp, op. cit.

**Frank Snepp, op. cit.

earth, voluntarily or under pressure, turned over the "golden throne" to Duong Van Minh. As for Minh, perhaps because of his naive nature, he believed in the sorcery of the sorcerer Martin and his assistant Merillon, and although he had long since been pushed out of the picture, at the last minute tried to accept the burden of unconditional surrender.

On the same day, the puppets' III Corps headquarters at Bien Hoa completely fell apart and withdrew to Go Vap so that the next day its commander, General Toan, could flee to the United States with Chief of Staff Cao Van Vien. The military command of the Saigon regime had lost its head.

For our part, we urgently relayed to all cadres and men on the Saigon Front, the following message of encouragement, dated 2200 hours, 28 April 1975:

"The Political Bureau and the Military Commission of the party Central Committee send their determined-to-win greetings to all cadres and men, party members and Youth Union members. Let us heroically advance to winning total victory in the historic campaign bearing the name of the great Uncle Ho.